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Alcoholic Reverie

What'll you have?

BY MEREDITH BRODY

RESTAURANTS

CHRISTINE HABERSTOCK

I AM DELIGHTED THAT L.A. NOW HAS a fine growth of coffeehouses all over the city, nobody could be happier than I with their civilizing presence, I who aspires to be when she grows up either a flâneur or a philanthropist (check the ads in the classifieds). Even if I don't remember the last time I spent an hour in one with a notebook and an espresso or a friend and a caffe latte, I'm exceedingly glad that they're *there*: they hold out the promise of a pause, of a dulcet hour of retrospection, reflection, conversation. (As Mark Girouard points out in *Cities and People*, "their [coffeehouses and cafés] importance as meeting places and generators of ideas was very great.")

Now that you can be assured of the rent of a table and a roof (with a cup of joe thrown in) for a couple of bucks in virtually every corner of the city, I wish that the next signifier of urbanity would be a wave of neighborhood bars. This may seem odd coming from someone whose New Year's resolutions included a solemn vow to drink *more* rather than less, but my need for bars is a romantic, not a pragmatic one, not as portrayed by Billy Wilder in *The Lost Weekend* but by Luis Buñuel in *My Last Sigh*, who begins a chapter called "Earthly Delights" with "I can't count the number of delectable hours I've spent in bars, the perfect places for the meditation and contemplation indispensable to life." I agree with some of his preferences — "Above all else, it must be quiet, dark, very comfortable" — but not all: he calls for "no music of any kind, no matter how faint," whereas a discreet cocktail-bar piano is just fine with me, or recorded Sinatra singing "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning," especially if they *are*.

Now that I think about it, they don't even have to be particularly quiet or dark — I'm very fond, for example, of the thinnish slice of bar that takes up about a quarter of the second room at Musso and Frank's, and it doesn't even have the 10 or a dozen small tables that both Buñuel and I require, just a long oak counter behind which the de rigueur wall of mirror and shelves of entrancing bottles glitter.

And I don't subscribe to the separation articulated by Richard Meltzer ("a cocktail lounge is already a step away from a bar towards decor"). Decor is perfectly okay: *I* sigh at the pictures in *Out With the Stars*, Jim Heiman's lamentably out-of-print volume on vanished Hollywood nightlife, of the Art Deco linoleum and ranks of chromium bar stools at the Circus Bar on Hollywood Boulevard, "conveniently located below the Actors Guild"; the leather-and-nailheads armchairs at the Wilshire Bowl (later Slapsy Maxie's) on the Miracle Mile, with three count 'em three white-coated bartenders squeezing shaking pouring behind the long bar; the African murals and fur-patterned chairs at the Zebra Room farther west on Wilshire; and especially the simple, intimate perfection of the Bar of Music on Beverly Boulevard, right across the street from where occasionally we can still quench our thirst today (if not our desire for serenity) with a margarita at El Coyote.

Despite attempts over the years to establish beachheads at the Raincheck Room (now gone) on Santa Monica, the Frolic Room on Hollywood Boulevard, the Cameo Room* (a trifle too Bukowski) on Sunset and (of course) the Formosa (on Formosa), plus that one lovely week when, infatuated, we closed Dan Tana's, the Tiki Ti, the El Padrino Room (oh, where have all the bridles gone?), and that ridiculous revolving bar called Angel's Flight (certainly we'd been thrown out of better places than this), I've never come up with an Our Bar as successful as the little no-name place on the Lower East Side we called the Radio Bar: a perfect place to meet or linger.

There are now clubs-masquerading-as-restaurants who call themselves the Something Bar or the Something Room (you know the ones I mean if you follow the investments or the habits of Jack Nicholson), but they're not what we need. We need a place about which we can say what Buñuel said about one of his favorites: "I loved the Paular the way I loved my closest friends."

*(Why are they all called *Room*?)

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